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ABSTRACT

The assumption that language is used solely to convey information with the maximum efficiency is refuted with examples of expository prose. Eight brief samples of expository prose are examined in order to demonstrate the use of syntactic euphemism to manipulate communication in complex and subtle ways. Syntactic euphemism involves the use of the rules of English syntax for the construction of bias. It is shown that processes such as topicalization and the creation of surface subjects and objects can function to suppress or distort information. Manipulation of sentence structure in the effort to instill beliefs while appearing to maintain objectivity is an example of language use as a subjective projection on the part of the speaker or writer. (RW)

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LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION: SYNTACTIC EUPHEMISM

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ABSTRACT

Linguists have tended to assume naively that language is used only to convey information with maximum efficiency, ignoring speaker manipulation of the communication in complex ways. Expository prose examples make it clear that language use is a subjective projection on the part of the speaker-writer.

Until recently, linguists have approached their studies of language with two assumptions that continue to influence our interpretations of linguistic data and the theories of language we construct. The first assumption accepts the tripartite representation of the linguistic act, as formulated by De Saussure, Bloomfield, and others, in which there is an encoder, a message, and a decoder. The second, corollary assumption about language turns up in the introductory chapters of linguistics text-books as a functional definition of language. Two of the more familiar versions of this definition are: "Language is a tool for communication," and "the purpose of language is to transmit messages from speaker to hearer." The naive inference drawn from these assumptions is: where there is language, there is communication. Yet, in spite of the appealing simplicity of such assumptions and the "common sense" approach to language behaviors they encourage, careful attention to actual uses of language reveals that our application of terms like COMMUNICATION and MESSAGE to data disguises the complex relationships between linguistic structures and whatever "messages" they may convey.

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One of the more recent directions in linguistic research in which one can see the effects of promulgating simplistic ideas about the rela-

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tionship(s) between linguistic structure and "meaning" is in the work now being done on "information packaging" and the construction of performance models, in which the emphasis of the analysis is on language use. (See, for example, Schlesinger, 1968; 1977; Chafe, 1976.) Without, apparently, taking into consideration the rhetorical effects of a speaker's structural choices in preparing an utterance, many of the articles published so far assume that syntactic choices, including processes such as topicalization and deletion, are made for the purpose of giving the addressee a maximum amount of information with maximum ease of interpretation. Chafe, for example, in his article "Giveness, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics, and Point of View" (1976), provides a typical description of how linguistics assume speakers/writers make stylistic choices:

> The [case] statuses to be discussed here have more to do with how the content is transmitted than with the content itself. Specifically, they all have to do with the speaker's assessment of how the addressee is able to process what [s/he] is saying against the background of a particular context. Not only do people's minds contain a large store of knowledge, they are also at any one moment in certain temporary states with relation to that knowledge . . . . Language functions effectively only if the speaker takes account of such states in the mind of the person [s/he] is talking to. It is only, for example, when the speaker adjusts what [s/he] says to what [s/he] assumes the addressee is thinking of at the moment that the message will be readily assimilated by the addressee.
>
> (pp. 25–26)

While such a description of the speaker's processes in making linguistic choices may be accurate in some ideal universe in which speakers never lie or distort or hide information, it is only a partial description of some instances of language use. We need a better understanding of the ways speakers make structural choices on the basis of a projection method, and we can begin by postulating three aspects of the cognitive readiness of the addressee with respect to interpretation of an utterance that they

take into account: (1) how much pertinent information the addressee has, gleaned either from previous knowledge about the subject at hand or from the immediate context of the utterance; (2) given such knowledge, how predisposed is the addressee to believe whatever the speaker has to say about the topic; and, (3) how astute is the addressee at applying the requisite interpretive strategies to the utterance itself, once it is produced. Put in less generous terms, speakers are always engaged in trying to guess just how GULLIBLE their prospective audience is. While it is useful for linguists to assume that speakers "adjust" their messages on the basis of what they think already exists in the minds of their addressees, and that messages are constructed to be "readily assimilated" by the target audience, it is simply foolish to think that the primary goal of all linguistic choices is MAXIMUM INFORMATION and MAXIMUM EASE OF INTERPRETATION on the part of the hearer/reader.

In fact, there is evidence which suggests that our ideas about the relationship between linguistic structures, as they are used by speakers, and messages, as they are intended to be decoded by listeners, will have to be revised if we are to understand the complexity of that relationship. As a first step toward exploring the diverse rhetorical strategies that linguistic structures can serve, I have collected examples of English usage that might be called, in another context, expository prose. As such, they illustrate the ways in which the syntactic structures available to the writer/speaker can be used to project an "impersonal" point of view to the audience. They reveal, however, not "objectivity" on the part of the speaker, but the creation of "syntactic euphemisms," utterances in which it is the speaker's intent to DOWNPLAY the grosser, more realistic aspects of some event for the "benefit" of the hearer, thereby providing less information than either the speaker or the hearer may possess at the time, or presenting whatever information there is in such a way as to protect the speaker's belief system. For all of their diversity of intent and structure, the following quotations illustrate the use of the rules of English syntax for the CONSTRUCTION OF BIAS, and they raise disquieting questions about the limits of our present understanding of the relationship between the syntactic structures selected by speakers and the "meanings" conveyed to hearers.

(1) THE INCEST frequently IS PRECIPITATED BY THE WIFE by sexually FRUSTRATING HER SPOUSE or RECOILING IN DISGUST AT HIS BEHAVIORS and excessess (i.e., alcoholism, infidelity, pedophilia).

(From MS. "No Comment," 7/79, p. 100)

(2) Probably THE NEXT PREJUDICE was towards wimmin. Early HUMANS learned that wimmin were not as physically strong as men and therefore couldn't possibly be the equals of men . . . Therefore THEY started treating wimmin like any other possession.

(Student essay)

(3) The RULE OF GRAMMAR you speak of, which is to use the masculine pronoun when it applies to both male and female, WAS NOT DEVISED TO PUT DOWN WOMEN. And IT IS NOT LIKELY TO BE CHANGED in the interest of women's rights.

("Dear Abby" column)

(4) WOMEN are here to stay so LET'S MAKE the best of THEM.

(Outdoor sign in Sioux City, Iowa, 1975)

(5) MARRIAGE PILLOW assures GREATER MARITAL JOY and FULFILLMENT! TESTED AND MODIFIED according to SUGGESTIONS of marriage counselors, religious and medical. AFFORDS RESILIENCY & ADJUSTABLE ELEVATION for more SENSITIVE ALIGNMENT.

(Ad in Spencer's catalog, 1979) 5

(6) Written and directed by Abby Mann . . . , the MINISERIES could stir controversy over its unflattering depiction of the FBI

and the Kennedy Administration. But there's no DOUBTING Paul Winfield's excellent performance in the title role, . . .

("The Screening Room," TV GUIDE)

(7) A MARCH AGAINST RAPE will be held on Monday, June 18, 1979. Join us for the March TO MAKE LINCOLN'S STREETS SAFE FROM ASSAULT.

(Ad for Take Back the Night March)

(8) The occupied Eastern territories are TO BECOME FREE OF JEWS.

(Letter from Himmler to one of his top SS officials, c. 1942, as cited in Lucy S. Dawidowicz, THE WAR AGAINST THE JEWS, 1933–1945, p. 129)

Although it would be presumptuous of me to try to extract every bit of "information" conveyed by these examples, and futile to attempt to divine all of the speakers' intentions from their utterances, these quotations reveal how speakers construct sentences that protect their point of view and attempt to make it digestible to their audience. Regardless of the tone a specific example may adopt, each one shows a speaker (or writer) striving to "package" information so that it will have maximum APPEAL to the hearer/reader, at the same time minimizing the possibility of negative reactions from the projected audience. As well as revealing how speakers construct utterances to downplay certain kinds of information, these examples also give us some realistic idea of the kinds of audiences speakers imagine themselves to be addressing.

The first sentence was produced by a writer who tried to describe the putative "causes" of incest in such a way as to convince readers that the perpetrator of incest, the male "spouse," is a victim, at the same time casting the wife, a third party, as the "guilty party" to blame for the incestuous activity. In order to make such an assertion

appear plausible, the writer selected INCEST as the topic of the sentence, and used the passive to move THE WIFE to sentence focus position along with her "crimes": "frustrating" her husband and "recoiling" from his criminal behaviors. The sentence was constructed so that the wife has become the agent who acts upon the male victim, while the male parent's social and psychological problems (here labeled as "behaviors and excesses," fairly neutral terms) are buried in parentheses as though they were somehow irrelevant to the topic of incest. The effect of the sentence, thus constructed, is to make the wife responsible for whatever ugly deeds her husband engages in. However heinous HIS crimes, hers is the worst: SHE drove him to it! (It is worth commenting in passing on the way in which "alcoholism, infidelity, and pedophilia" are conjoined as though they were COMPARABLE "behaviors." Alcoholism, to the best of our knowledge, is apparently a physical problem that, although it has repercussions in the lives of the alcoholic's immediate family and friends, remains an essentially self-destructive behavior. Infidelity, which sounds strange in its parenthetical company, could be regarded as a "social problem," but only if one BELIEVES that human pair-bonding is, IPSO FACTO, monogamous. But pedophilia, the behavior most closely tied to incestuous activity, is also the single term of the three that labels an activity that can do physical, as well as emotional damage to the child so victimized and exploited by a parent or relative.) That such constructions can be "read through" by readers who are not easily taken in is evidenced by the fact that this example was spotted by a reader of MS. and submitted to the "No Comment" section of that magazine.

How would the reader's reaction to the sentence have differed if the writer had topicalized either THE WIFE or HER SPOUSE, since both were potential candidates for topicalization? (The resulting sentences appear below as (1)a. and b., respectively.)

(1) a. The wife frequently precipitates the incest by sexually frustrating her husband. . .

b. Her spouse is frequently driven to incest by the wife who sexually frustrates him or recoils from his

behaviors and excesses. . .

Both versions lack the distinctly "objective" tone carried by the writer's published choice. (1) a., in which the wife is both agent of the verb PRECIPITATE and the topic of the clause, foregrounds her as the one responsible for the crimes committed by her husband, and I suspect that this version would have evoked a more hostile response from the reader than the original. (1) b., on the other hand, in which the male spouse is the topic, also requires a change of verb if one is to retain the sentence structure as much as possible. The alternative sentence produced by shifting the topic and the consequent change of verb emphasizes the "helplessness" of the husband as it was perceived by the writer, and, although it provides a more explicit way of packaging the writer's description, it is equally as likely to infuriate the cautious reader. These proposed alternative choices available to the writer provide enlightening contrasts to the neutrality achieved by topicalizing the inanimate behavior for which the male is responsible.

My second example is instructive because it shows a student struggling to construct a sentence that will sound unbiased, while, at the same time, it presents rather conventional attitudes as "facts." The sequence of sentences begins with PREJUDICE as the topic of the initial sentence, the HUMANS becomes the topic of the second sentence; WOMEN is the object of the pseudo-predicate TOWARDS in the first sentence, but the topic of the embedded clause in the second. Although the THEY that is the topic of the last sentence is potentially ambiguous, it can only have HUMANS as its antecedent, since WOMEN have been distinguished from "early humans" and have become the object of the verb TREAT. The process of topicalization becomes a means of setting wimmin apart, as "other." Notice that there is no overt agency in the first sentence; the "prejudice" seems to bring itself into existence, and, if one insists on reading HUMANS as including both females and males, then women become culpable for their subordinate social status.

My third example is interesting because it denies the validity of alternative opinions at the same time that it appears to entertain

them, and both of the assertions depend upon the deletion of agents in passive constructions. On the one hand, "Abby" manages to topicalize "rule of grammar" by using the passive, further describes it in a non-restrictive relative clause (as though it were simply additional information), but then implicitly agrees that "the rule" was made up by her choice of the verb DEVISE. (A less revealing construction might have been, "The rule of grammar you speak of . . . DOES NOT EXIST to put down women," which would successfully bypass the problem of implicit agency in her version.) In her second sentence, she uses another truncated passive for her assertion that the rule of grammar will not be changed, but she also admits the adverb LIKELY as a caveat of some kind (as though it MIGHT be changed?), and implies, in a prepositional phrase, that the change would be "in the interest of women's rights," which effectively contradicts her first statement. If my analysis is plausible, the structure of the two sentences may betray ambivalence on Abby's part, because the reader is left to wonder if the anonymous individuals who DEVISED the "rule of grammar" might not also, in a more benevolent frame of mind, CHANGE it. What is her message, anyway?

The message of the billboard in Sioux City cited in (4) was clearly written for the reading pleasure of "men only," in spite of the fact that it was publicly displayed. Did the writer imagine that only men would see it, that only men drove past that particular place, or, perhaps unintentionally, that women, too, should make the best use of themselves? The point of view of the utterance is distinctly masculinist, however one interprets it, because WOMEN, the topic of the first clause, becomes the object in the second clause. Again, there is no overt agent for the verb MAKE, although the elliptical US in LET'S enables us to read in "us (men)" as the understood referent of the pronoun. Such statements are interpreted as meaningful only in a universe of discourse in which all the projected readers are male, and all women are defined as OUTSIDE the discourse contract between speaker and hearer.

Example (5), an advertisement that occurred in a Spencer's catalogue, is a classic example of syntactic euphemism, the use of syn-

tactic structures to convey a message indirectly, without explicit reference to the subject at all. The writer assures us that "marriage pillow," the topic of the entire sequence, promotes "greater marital joy" and "fulfillment," both indirect ways of referring to the use of elevation to increase the probability that the female partner will also have an orgasm during intercourse. (I'll skip over the dubious value of "suggestions" from religious counselors in the testing of the pillow! WHAT could they have said? It is the nominalizations in the second fragment, RESILIENCY, ADJUSTABLE ELEVATION, and SENSITIVE ALIGNMENT, that hint at the physical variables involved for the female during heterosexual intercourse, without explicit reference to anatomical structures. For "resiliency" we can read in 'provides cushioning for the woman who bears the weight of the male in the missionary position'; for "adjustable elevation" we can interpolate 'can be adjusted (by either party) to afford more physcial comfort for both partners, depending upon their relative size, weight, and other physical characteristics'; for "sensitive alignment" we can read in 'males can minimize the pain of penetration for women by inserting the penis at whatever height is most comfortable for the woman.' The adjective SENSITIVE modifies ALIGNMENT ambiguously, because it could describe a heightening of pleasure for both or either of the partners, the lessening of pain for the woman, or imply that use of the pillow is a "sensitive" (considerate) action on the part of the male. Ah, "marital joy"!

The short excerpt from a TV GUIDE review provided in (6) illustrates the use of syntactic position to "damn with faint praise." The implications to be deduced by the reader fairly leap across the sentence boundaries. In the first sentence, the writer chose to assert that "the miniseries could stir controversy," not the SUBJECT of the miniseries, or the PEOPLE who made the miniseries, and then proceeded to explain that the "controversy" would be stirred up by "its unflattering depiction of the FBI and the Kenedy Administration." First, note the possessive pronoun ITS, which refers back to its inanimate antecedent, MINISERIES, which casts the series as agentive. Had the writer elected instead to foreground the people who produced the series, an animate pronoun would have been necessary. Second, the insertion of the prenominal modifier UNFLATTERING, functioning

as an attribute of DEPICTION, enables the writer to make the covert assertion that the series does not follow some unspecified expectations of the writer, or the audience the writer imagines will watch the series; but we are not told WHO, precisely, will perceive the resulting TV series to be "unflattering." There is a sense here that the reviewer is preparing the audience not to like the series, but it is by implication rather than direct statement. This inference is further borne out when one reads the sentence immediately following. The BUT that begins the next sentence clearly marks its positive assertion as standing in CONTRAST to the implied negative evaluation of the first sentence. As readers, we need to remember that "stirring controversy" is NOT necessarily a negatively valued activity, whereas describing something as "unflattering" is an explicit negative judgment. As these sentences stand, however, that BUT forces the reader to interpret "stir controversy" as a negative, rather than a positive, predication. Such writing reveals the subtleties that are possible with minor syntactic manipulations.

Syntactic euphemism at its best (or worst) is exemplified in (7), in which everything specific about a Take Back the Night March has been suppressed. We are exhorted "to make Lincoln's streets safe from sexual assault," but everyone knows that it is men who are the agents of sexual assaults against wimmin. The PLACE in which SOME sexual assaults occur has become the object to be protected. Wimmin, the victims of sexual assault, are as invisible as the men who are guilty of the crime of rape. There are no names named here--we protect the guilty and erase the victims. This particular construction was produced by a woman who was afraid that explicit naming of either agents OR victims would alienate males in the Lincoln community. Such sentences go considerably beyond Dickinson's injunction to "tell the truth, but tell it slant." Whatever "truth" such statements may point to, their elliptical descriptions of events in the real world reveal more about the cowardice of the writer than they do about their purported subjects.

My last example demonstrates the creation of syntactic euphemism in the hands of the powerful rather than the powerless, as is the

case in (7). Example (8) is the first sentence of a longer quotation from one of Himmler's letters. That letter goes on to say: "The execution of this very grave order has been placed on my shoulders by the Fuhrer. No one can deny me the responsibility anyway." The additional context serves to emphasize the euphemistic quality of my example sentence, in which the topic is "the occupied Eastern territories" and its pseudo-predicate is "are to become free of Jews." The entire sentence had to be put together in such a way that there would be NO explicit agency associated with the activity described by "are to become free." The victims of that activity, the Jews, appear only as the object of the particle OF, and the choice of the adjective FREE makes the entire proposal described by the sentence sound as if it is to be an exercise in CLEANSING the countries so affected, as though the activity of exterminating millions of people is being done as a "favor" to the inanimate "Eastern territories." In spite of the acceptance of responsibility asserted in the remainder of the quotation, the "benevolent" finality of the horror so described, mass murder, paralyzes the mind. The euphemism of the initial sentence reveals the detachment of Himmler from the realities of the genocide he was responsible for.

As exploratory and tentative as my analysis of these examples has been, I have tried to show that processes such as topicalization and the creation of surface "subjects" and "objects" can function to suppress and distort information as well as maximize information, and that our descriptions of such phenomena have, to date, neglected to account for the more insidious uses to which syntactic rules can be put. My lengthy discussions of some of these examples and, in some cases, the alternative structures available to the writer, has served to indicate that Chafe's description of information packaging as preparing a message so that it "will be readily assimilated by the reader" erroneously assumes a "benevolent" writer/subject. Certainly no single term or phrase currently available in the literature accurately describes the effects of these sentences. They are not "lying" in any conventional sense of the term, nor are they simply "distortion." Such sentences are produced when the writer/speaker intentionally refuses to articulate ideas explicitly for the hear/reader, and their existence (and prolifera-

tion) requires us to refine our analysis and go behond our present understanding of the relationship between the linguistic choices made in the creation of sentences and the ways in which such structures are put to use in discourse. We are not dealing here with propaganda or style in any sense in which either has been defined up to the present time. Whatever we finally choose to call such uses of language, they reveal that the structure of a sentence, as it presents ideas to the hearer/reader, is a complex code that functions to describe people, actions, and events as they are conceived by the writer/speaker, as s/he wants the reader/hearer to conceive of them. Such readily available phrases as "truth value," "reference value," even the putative distinction between form and content, are descriptively useless when one attempts to grasp the motivations of the speaker in producing them and the "messages" they are intended to convey to the speaker's imagined audience. We are looking at sentences constructed to produce conviction, to create belief, to maintain the facade of "objectivity" and dispassionate observation. There is no pretense in these examples to using syntactic rules in the interest of facilitating interpretation on the part of the hearer. However one may choose, finally, to incorporate such evidence as part of a theory of language use, it will have to be within some larger conceptualization of the relationship between the linguistic signals produced by the speaker and the "message" transmitted to the hearer.

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